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# English Travelers' Narratives of Iran's Religious Sites and Cities during the Qajar Era

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## ABSTRACT

The present study belongs to the category of historical research. The required data were collected through library-based research, and the study has been conducted using a descriptive-analytical method. The religious customs and beliefs of Iranians during the Qajar period constitute one of the significant and noteworthy subjects in the reports of English travelers, who sought to examine and analyze this dimension of Iranian life from all possible perspectives. In this context, Iran's sacred and holy sites and cities received considerable attention, and beyond the physical descriptions of these locations, the beliefs and religious perceptions of the Iranian people regarding these places were carefully documented and interpreted. For the British, the establishment and consolidation of colonial dominance over Iran required substantial political influence within the governing structure; consequently, understanding the moral character and psychological dispositions of the Iranian nation—particularly their religious practices and beliefs—was regarded as a primary strategic priority.

**Keywords:** *Religious sites; English travelers; Beliefs; Qajar dynasty*

## Introduction

The history of relations between Iran and England dates back to the Ilkhanid period and has continued, with fluctuations, to the present day. Whereas during the Safavid era the English primarily pursued economic interests within the framework of reciprocal relations, in the Qajar period they sought, in addition to economic benefits, to acquire political influence within the Iranian ruling elite in order to implement their long-term plans for the protection of the colony of India and, in particular, to counter the strategies of France and Russia. During the Qajar era, relations between Iran and England were largely unilateral and, in effect, resembled a relationship of ruler and subject or master and subordinate, through which only British interests were secured. One of the principal reasons for the success of the English in achieving comprehensive penetration into all spheres of power in Qajar Iran can arguably be attributed to their extensive knowledge of the land and of all dimensions of Iranian society, knowledge that was made possible only through the precise and comprehensive reports of English agents and travelers who visited Iran.



The religious customs and beliefs of Iranians and the degree of their adherence to religious convictions constituted some of the most important concerns of the English in their efforts to understand the Iranian mentality, as is clearly reflected in their travel narratives. They also devoted special attention to Iranian sacred places and religious cities. Mosques, shrines, and religious cities were carefully observed, and through this attention certain superstitious practices popular among Iranians were likewise revealed.

The present study is based on the central question of how the English evaluated the sacred and holy sites and cities of Qajar-era Iran. The subsidiary questions include: what position did Iranian mosques in the Qajar period hold in the view of the English? Why did the pilgrimage practices of Qajar-era Iranians attract the attention of the English? Why did the tradition of burying the dead near religious sites become a subject of English interest? In response to the main research question, the following hypothesis is proposed: the English visited Iranian sacred and holy places with great care and meticulousness, and in addition to describing and depicting their structures, they paid special attention to the functions of these sites. In response to the subsidiary questions, it may be stated that: Iranian mosques were among the first features to attract the attention of English agents and travelers; the pilgrimages to Mecca, Medina, Karbala, Mashhad, and Qom were among the practices of particular interest to the English; and the burial of the dead near religious sites was not overlooked by them. In light of these questions and hypotheses, the primary objective of this article is to analyze English reports concerning the sacred and holy places of Iranians.

The description of Iranian mosques in the Qajar era, the explanation of Iranian pilgrimage cities, and the examination of English perspectives on the tradition of burying the dead near religious sites during the Qajar period constitute the secondary objectives of the article. In terms of nature and methodology, this research belongs to the category of historical studies, and its required data have been collected through library-based research. Among all the tools that assist modern researchers in reconstructing the past, travel accounts hold a special position. Travel writing has been particularly widespread among Westerners, who were keen to record what they saw or heard in foreign lands. With the profound transformations that occurred in Europe, known as the Renaissance, European presence in Eastern lands, including Iran, gradually expanded, and especially during the Safavid period numerous enthusiasts and adventurers from different parts of Europe traveled to Iran. What remains from these encounters is a large body of travel literature, which can be used to reconstruct aspects of Iranian history that have been neglected by official historians (1).

Most English travelers who journeyed to Iran, either as part of special missions or out of personal interest, recorded their observations and experiences from the beginning to the end of their travels in Iran, and upon their return and publication of these accounts, they informed their superiors or other interested compatriots about their journeys and acquainted them with the realities of life in a land that they still imagined as legendary. In the perception of the English, Qajar-era Iran was “a land both familiar and unfamiliar ... a place of imagination that constantly oscillated between complete familiarity and absolute strangeness” (2).

English travelers to Iran described all dimensions of life in Qajar-era society in their travel accounts. In addition to their careful recording of events and occurrences, the attraction of Eastern life and the fulfillment of assigned duties to the highest possible standard played an important role in this process, since part of the responsibilities of political and military agents consisted of preparing reliable reports on life in Iran. They were tasked with collecting precise information on Iran's military and financial capabilities, its major products, agricultural conditions, trade, and crafts, as well as data concerning customs, revenues, commerce, history, and ancient monuments (3). As a result

of such detailed instructions issued by British governmental authorities to agents bound for Iran, these officials paid close attention to every aspect of Iranian life in their reports (4), particularly in the domain of religious beliefs, to such an extent that some of them meticulously enumerated the followers of various sects and creeds within their areas of assignment. Sir Percy Sykes, while serving in Kerman for the establishment of a consulate, estimated the population of the city at fifty thousand and separately recorded the adherents of various religions and sects, including Shi'i, Sunni, Baha'i, Azali, Shaykhi, Sufi, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Hindu (5).

The English who entered Iran during the Qajar era, being well aware of the religious sentiments and emotions of Iranians, and particularly of their reverence for divine prophets, did not hesitate to exploit this knowledge whenever their interests or lives were in danger. When Layard was visiting the tomb of the Prophet Daniel in Susa and observed strong anti-English sentiment among the population, who regarded him as impure and as a special agent engaged in espionage, he immediately addressed the situation by telling the people who were sensitive about his journey: "In our country, too, we know the Prophet Daniel and believe in his miracles, and for this reason I have traveled here to visit this blessed shrine," thereby attempting to dispel their suspicions (6). At times, in order to remain safe from the dangers posed by certain tribes and clans, English travelers introduced themselves as pilgrims to the House of God, performed common acts of worship such as prayer, and resorted to oaths, even invoking the Prophet of Islam as witness and claiming to be Sunni Muslims on pilgrimage (7). They would also use the phrase "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate" when entering a house (8). Such meticulousness and attention on the part of English agents and envoys in Qajar Iran enabled them to exploit Iranian religious emotions with considerable skill and even to contribute to the spread and reinforcement of superstitions.

### **Mosques, Shrines, and Religious Cities**

One of the most visually striking structures for English travelers entering Iran during the Qajar era was the mosque, which existed in abundance in every city and village, with their blue-colored domes and minarets lending them a distinctive splendor and magnificence (9). Almost all English visitors, because of their Christian faith and being regarded by Iranians as unbelievers, were deprived of viewing the interior of Muslim mosques and shrines, especially since "Shi'i Muslims were far more strict than Sunnis" (10). They were therefore limited to observing the exterior of mosques and religious structures and the sacred tombs, taking pleasure in these beautiful buildings "with their domes and minarets and walls covered and adorned with multicolored glazed tiles, delicately and elegantly designed and shimmering in distinctive hues" (6).

At times, English travelers were intensely eager to visit the interiors of mosques and devised their own methods to do so. Among these strategies was wearing Iranian clothing, dyeing their mustaches and beards black, and entering the mosque incognito like Muslims (6), or obtaining permission to enter by any possible means (9). Visiting the interiors of mosques provided the English with a valuable opportunity to compare them with churches in England, to praise the colorful tiles and stained glass of the mosques, and to admire the dazzling luxury, ceremony, and ornamentation of these buildings, which they regarded as being in clear contradiction with the precepts of Islam that called believers to simplicity. Moreover, they expressed regret that mosques had largely become shelters for homeless and destitute people (9).

Occasionally, due to the absence of suitable accommodation, they themselves were compelled to spend the night in a mosque (11). However, not all English travelers entering Iran were equally captivated by the beauty of Iranian mosque tilework or inclined to praise Iranian architecture unreservedly. Some who possessed artistic and

architectural expertise described Iranian mosques as ordinary and lacking in artistic richness, sanctity, architectural distinction, and monumental scale (12).

The beauty and allure of the tiles used in Iranian mosques were so enchanting that some English visitors were induced to pay small sums to obtain permission from local custodians to dismantle and plunder portions of mosque tilework, which represented the artistic and cultural heritage of Iran. Such an incident occurred in the historic mosque of Natanz, and it is believed that some of the exquisite tiles now displayed in the South Kensington Museum originally belonged to this mosque, which was constructed in 1316 (5).

Pilgrimage to sacred and blessed places is one of the religious practices of followers of most faiths, observed in various forms across different regions of the world. In Qajar-era Iran, given the diversity and number of pilgrimage centers, this practice was widely embraced by the population, and visiting religious sites was considered a part of daily life. For Iranians of that period, pilgrimage was among the few available recreations of rural society, and its recreational aspect may at times have outweighed its devotional sincerity (13).

Religious sites hold exceptional sanctity and importance among Muslims, and Shi'a Muslims in particular display profound devotion to such locations. The House of God in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina represented the foremost pilgrimage priorities for Iranians. In addition, for those who possessed the necessary financial means, the journey to Mecca was regarded as a religious obligation, for "the pilgrimage to the House of God is fundamentally motivated by devotion to God, and according to the command of the Prophet Muhammad, the pilgrimage is a religious duty for all who are able, to be performed once in a lifetime through circumambulation of the House of God" (14).

Alongside the aspiration of every Iranian to visit the House of God in Mecca and the tomb of the Prophet of Islam in Medina, Iranians also held deep reverence for the Shi'i shrines and pilgrimage cities of Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, and Kazimayn, which during the Qajar era lay within Ottoman territory. Traveling to Karbala under the conditions of that period was exceedingly difficult. In addition to the long distances and the necessity of passing through unsafe regions within Iran, Iranian pilgrims were frequently subjected to violence and humiliation by Ottoman officials. The hardships of the journey to Karbala and other Ottoman pilgrimage cities were numerous, and most of those who embarked on this arduous journey belonged to the lower and impoverished classes, driven by devotion to undertake this perilous path. Many never returned home due to the sufferings endured along the way. These pilgrims were, in reality, defenseless individuals whose survival depended on what could only be described as miraculous intervention. On their journeys, they faced not only bandits who periodically stripped them of their possessions, but also unscrupulous transport agents who exploited them in the absence of effective law, each demanding payment at will (6).

Among the Twelve Imams revered by Shi'a Muslims, only the tomb of the Eighth Imam is located in Iran, a fact that endowed the city of Mashhad—transformed by Shah Abbas I into the "Ka'ba of the Iranian world" (15)—with special prestige and distinction. Pilgrimage to the shrine of the Eighth Imam was considered one of the greatest aspirations of every Iranian Shi'i (5). Upon entering the city and beholding the golden dome of the shrine, which "from afar shines like a flame of fire and stands as the pride of the Shi'i world" (5), pilgrims would engage in prayer. Numerous accounts of miracles attributed to the shrine circulated widely, thereby increasing the number of pilgrims and elevating the reported miracles to the thousands (15, 16).

The two gilded minarets and golden dome, radiating brilliance beneath the sun (16) and visible from great distances, formed the first enchanting spectacle to greet every newcomer to Mashhad. This was the tomb of the

Eighth Imam, a descendant of the Prophet of Islam (5). Among English travelers of the Qajar era, Lord Curzon provided the most detailed description of the shrine, claiming to be the first member of the British Parliament to enter the precincts of Mashhad (15).

Curzon, in his depiction of the external and internal features of the shrine of the Eighth Imam—"undoubtedly the richest tomb in the entire Islamic world" (15)—also described the bast sanctuary, regarded as an inviolable refuge "for every offender" (15). He then elaborated upon the various components of the complex: the golden-roofed saqqākhāneh, the arches and tilework of the walls and iwans adorned with Qur'anic verses in Kufic script; the minarets, the main dome of the shrine, the principal tomb enclosure, the graves of prominent figures buried near the main courtyard, including the tomb of Abbas Mirza, crown prince of Fath-Ali Shah; the Goharshad Mosque with its exceptionally fine tiles and dome surpassing even that of the shrine in height, decorated with blue, green, and orange tiles; the library of the shrine, its administrative apparatus, and its monetary and material revenues (15). Along with the caravanserais and schools adjacent to the shrine, the tile-covered iwans and mirrored interiors, all of these features captivated travelers, particularly the Goharshad Mosque, described as a magnificent example of architecture, splendidly adorned and authentically constructed, with minarets on both sides that enhanced its grandeur and beauty (16).

Not all English travelers, however, were unanimous in their admiration of the dome and minarets of the shrine of Imam Reza and the Goharshad Mosque. MacGregor compared the complex with Islamic architecture in India and argued that "the form of the shrine's dome resembles dozens of others—neither more nor less beautiful—and in terms of symmetry cannot be compared with many domes in India... the grand buildings of India, numerous as they are, include at least two structures whose symmetry surpasses that of the shrine's minarets: the Taj Mahal and the Great Mosque of Delhi" (17).

In Mashhad, as in other Muslim holy sites, "foreign travelers are forbidden to enter the inner precincts of the shrine, and should anyone transgress these boundaries, the European authorities residing in Iran would be subjected to serious difficulties" (5). Moreover, the personal safety of the individuals themselves would be endangered, and Europeans were generally reluctant to enter the inner sanctuary of the shrine of the Eighth Imam, believing that "the consequences were not worth it" (17). Nevertheless, extensive descriptions of the shrine complex, its surrounding buildings, and Iranian pilgrimage rituals appear in the writings of English travelers, reflecting their close attention to this dimension of Iranian religious life.

With the official establishment of Twelver Shi'ism during the Safavid period and the gradual increase of its adherents, Iranian devotion and loyalty to the family of the Prophet of Islam and his descendants intensified. Although the tombs of most Shi'i Imams lay outside the geographical borders of Qajar Iran, the presence of the tomb of the Eighth Imam and his sister in the cities of Mashhad and Qom enabled those who lacked the financial or physical means to travel to Mecca, Medina, or the Shi'i shrines in Ottoman territory to fulfill their devotional aspirations through pilgrimage to Mashhad and Qom.

The city of Qom, which was situated "in the midst of a salt desert" (5), was known as a "haven of safety" (15) because of the shrine of Fatimah Ma'sumah and the city's status as a center of clerical presence (13). It consistently attracted Iranian attention, and the tombs of certain Safavid and Qajar rulers were located in the vicinity of this sanctuary. Every year, large numbers of pilgrims traveled to Qom to visit Fatimah Ma'sumah, reportedly constituting eighty percent of travelers on the roads leading to Qom (9). Because of its urban form and appearance, Qom was described by some foreign travelers as "melancholy" (18) and as a "ruin" (13). Yet a more sympathetic view referred

to Qom, on account of its blue ceramics, as the “blue city,” asserting that nowhere else had the traveler witnessed such an abundance of domes and blue tiles (10).

Because of their religious convictions, Iranians held the city of Qom in exceptional esteem, chiefly because it contained the burial place of Fatimah Ma’sumah, the sister of Imam Reza; this fact placed the site among the most renowned shrines in Iran (13). The gilded covering of Fatimah Ma’sumah’s dome was constructed by order of Fath-‘Ali Shah, and the large clock of the shrine, according to General Schindler, originally belonged to a monastic establishment in the Caucasus and was later transferred to this site (5).

Upon entering Qom, every traveler encountered a striking sight: “the dome and minarets of the shrine of Fatimah shone with complete brilliance under the sunlight” (15). A substantial portion of the grandeur of the sanctuary and the golden dome of Fatimah Ma’sumah was attributed to the patronage of the Qajar royal household, particularly Fath-‘Ali Shah, who—following a votive commitment—paid special attention to Qom and “replaced the tiled exterior of the dome with gilded copper plates, built a school adjacent to it with an endowment to support the education of one hundred seminarians, and also founded a hospital and a guesthouse; it is said that he spent 100,000 tomans there annually. Whenever he went to Qom, he walked on foot from the road to the shrine, and when he died away from that place, he was buried in Qom according to his will” (15).

Because of the spiritual presence of clerics in this city, Qom was governed by specific rules and regulations not observed elsewhere; for example, “wine is not sold in Qom because it has been prohibited by the clerics. Qom is an interesting place for seeking refuge, or, in Iranian terms, for taking bast” (18).

A public shrine beloved by residents of the capital during the Qajar period was the sanctuary of Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azim, one of the descendants of the Prophet of Islam, which reportedly received about “three hundred thousand” pilgrims annually (15). Located near Tehran, it was “highly regarded among the people of Tehran and was also considered a place of asylum for criminals” (19). The shrine of Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azim was built upon Roman ruins in what had been an ancient settlement, and “the tomb and golden dome of ‘Abd al-‘Azim constituted a major gathering place for pilgrims and those who circumambulated the sacred sanctuary” (20).

Curzon maintained that the value and significance of this shrine extended to the pre-Islamic era. In his view, “most writers have taken an easy path regarding the identity of this imamzadeh and have merely referred to it as one of the sacred figures of Islam; yet it appears that long before the advent of Islam the site was also regarded as a revered place and the tomb of a holy woman—perhaps for this reason even today Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azim remains of particular interest to women” (15). The proximity of this religious site to the capital meant that most Tehran residents traveled there for pilgrimage, a practice that also included the shah, princes, and members of the court (21).

The shrine of Bibi Shahrbanu, near Tehran, was also among the favored pilgrimage sites of women in Tehran, and one of its reported miracles was that “men are not able to enter there, whereas women go easily and perform the visitation” (10).

Across Iran, numerous sacred tombs and religious places existed, each revered and respected by local populations either on the basis of local belief or within Shi’i devotional frameworks. Some of these venerated sites were the graves of saintly figures or virtuous persons, to which pilgrims traveled from near and far with sincere intention, seeking assistance through their perceived sanctity. The tomb of Shah Ni’mat Allah Vali in Mahan, Kerman, was among such places. Shah Ni’mat Allah Vali, whose lineage was traced to Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, was a mystic of the fourteenth century who was highly esteemed by the rulers of his time and received precious



gifts from the farthest reaches of the world. After his death, his tomb became a public shrine and, during the Qajar period, enjoyed substantial popular devotion: “the turquoise dome and minarets of Shah Ni‘mat Allah’s shrine are exceedingly beautiful and enchanting from afar, but its interior precinct—apart from the verdant trees and the fine tilework around it—has no other particularly noteworthy features” (5). In addition to well-known religious sites across the Islamic world associated with revered figures, almost every region of Iran contained places known as imamzadehs, understood to be the burial sites of the descendants and relatives of the Shi‘i Imams. Such places held special sanctity among Iranians, and visiting them whenever possible was regarded as an important opportunity. The origins of imamzadehs and sacred tombs were diverse, each shaped by the beliefs of particular communities; for example, a location believed by local residents to have been a resting place of Imam Reza during his flight from enemies became a sacred and respected shrine (6). In Layard’s usage, these shrines referred to “qadamgah” sites constructed along Imam Reza’s route from Medina to Marv.

Imamzadehs and certain revered shrines were also expected to produce miracles, and ordinary people traveled to them to resolve personal difficulties, such as the healing of the sick: “one of the pilgrims pleaded and implored the imamzadeh to intercede before the Divine Presence so that God might grant him a male child” (9).

Beliefs about sacred places differed from region to region. The Lurs of an area in Luristan believed in an imamzadeh named Shahzadeh Ahmad and held that “this imamzadeh possessed a miracle that healed the bite of any venomous snake, and today whenever a Lur in this region is bitten by a snake, he is brought to this imamzadeh and they believe he is cured” (22).

The architecture of imamzadehs depended on geographical location, locally available materials, and climatic conditions. Each region followed its own patterns in constructing religious buildings, which in turn produced considerable diversity in imamzadeh forms. In addition to pilgrimage and the performance of religious rites, these religious sites also served as places of asylum and bast, and in some regions their precincts were used by local inhabitants to hold weekly markets (23).

In different parts of Iran, other shrines also emerged in accordance with local beliefs, each possessing its own distinct sanctity, respect, and prestige. Their number could be considered as extensive as Iran’s settlements themselves. The narratives regarding the origins of some of these sites may not align with any of the preceding criteria, yet ordinary people, on the basis of what may be described as popular religion, did not abandon such convictions. One example is a spring in Eqlid, Fars, where the presence of fish in its waters was attributed “to a miracle of the Prophet Muhammad—although the Prophet never set foot in Eqlid or even in Iran. Our guide, insisting strongly, pointed out the mark and trace of his hand on a rock, and if we smiled at his credulity, he became angry” (13).

## Conclusion

The Qajar era represents, in many respects, one of the most influential periods in the history of Iran. One of the primary reasons for this significance can be attributed to the profound global transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which compelled the major powers of the time to seek inexpensive raw materials and new markets in Asia and Africa. Iran was among the countries that possessed abundant resources required by European industries and was also viewed as a desirable target market for manufactured goods. Colonial powers, which had shown special interest in Iran since the Safavid period, succeeded in achieving many of their objectives and interests during the Qajar era. Representatives of various European states, including England, were dispatched to

Iran with diverse political, economic, and military aims, and in the course of their missions they paid particular attention to the religious beliefs and convictions of the population as a means of advancing their goals. The popular religious beliefs of the people were of special interest to Europeans. Mosques, shrines, and sacred and holy cities were examined both in terms of their physical appearance and with respect to the religious significance attributed to them by the population. Although such descriptions may appear, at first glance, to be merely descriptive or ordinary, it can be argued that behind this attention lay far broader objectives. The English, in particular, were highly skilled in exploiting the religious beliefs and popular convictions of the Iranian people, and throughout the sacred and revered places of Iran they consistently sought clues and opportunities for the realization of their wider strategic aims.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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